

## **A contextual analysis of party system formation in Nigeria, 1960-2011**

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the parties and party systems in Nigeria since independence. The article argues that the country has witnessed four different types of party systems corresponding to the four democratisation attempts that saw the emergence of constitutional governments since 1960. Special focus is awarded to the transformations of the four party systems and developments in their various institutional designs including regulating the number of parties that participate in the electoral politics of the country. In trying to achieve its objective, the article adopts chronological and thematic approaches. Chronologically, the paper investigates these party systems in successive order beginning with the First Republic when the elements of party politics were first adopted in Nigeria. Thematically, the article focuses on those issues that influenced the formation and transformation of the party systems from the First Republic in 1960 to the present Fourth Republic.

**Keywords:** Democracy; elections; Nigeria; party system; political parties.

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini mengkaji parti-parti dan sistem berparti di Nigeria sejak kemerdekaannya. Artikel ini membincangkan bahawa negara tersebut telah menyaksikan empat jenis sistem berparti yang berbeza tetapi selari dengan empat cubaan pendekmorasian dengan melihat kemunculan kerajaan berpelembagaan sejak 1960. Fokus khusus diberikan kepada transformasi empat sistem berparti tersebut dan pembangunan dalam pelbagai bentuk institusi termasuk pengawalan beberapa parti yang terlibat dalam politik pilihan raya dalam negara tersebut. Untuk mencapai objektif kajian, artikel ini mengambil kira pendekatan-pendekatan kronologikal dan tema-tema tertentu. Secara kronologikalnya, artikel ini mengkaji beberapa sistem berparti mengikut urutan bermula dari menjadi Republik Nigeria Pertama apabila

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unsur-unsur parti politik mula diterima pakai di Nigeria. Secara tematiknya, artikel ini memberi tumpuan terhadap isu-isu yang mempengaruhi maklumat dan transformasi sistem berparti sejak menjadi Republik Nigeria pada tahun 1960 sehingga kini iaitu Republik Ke empat.

**Kata kunci:** Demokrasi; pilihan raya; Nigeria; sistem berparti; parti berpolitik.

Political parties are an essential component of the democratic system of governance. As political organisations, they aggregate, articulate, and promote public interests. They also serve as vehicles through which the pursuit of power in the political system becomes legitimate (Randall and Svasand, 2002). According to Elmer Schattschneider (1942), political parties are indispensable to modern democracy. Their development generally corresponds with the development of democracy and its consolidation in the modern period (Duverger, 1967; Snyder & Ting, 2011). Unlike the experience of other developing countries where the democratisation process was relatively uninterrupted by military coups, Nigeria's fractured experience affected the development of its parties and party system (Dode, 2010). Over the course of five decades, Nigeria has witnessed at least four types of party systems corresponding with the four major democratisation attempts that culminated into civilian regimes. This article investigates these party systems from the First to the Fourth Republic. The objective is to demonstrate the contextual linkage between these different systems. The linkage lies in the historical experience that shaped the perception of policymakers on the best party system for the country. The approach adopted for this review is both chronological as well as thematic. Chronologically, this investigation follows these attempts in building party systems in succession. Thematically, the article provides an analytical exposition of these four party systems in Nigeria.

### **Parties and party system: A framework for analysis**

A political party has several definitions. Anthony Downs (1957, pp. 24-25) sees it as a "coalition of men seeking to control the governing apparatus by legal means". To Leon D. Epstein (1980, p. 9), party is "any group, however loosely organised, seeking to elect government officeholders under a given label". According to Joseph A. Schlesinger (1991), a party "is a group organised to gain control of government in the name of the group by winning election to public office". In essence,

as John Aldrich (1995, p. 11) argues, parties symbolise coalitions of the elites who wish to capture instruments of policymaking through legitimate means in a community. Evident in these conceptualisations is the near universal consensus on at least five points. First, parties bear labels or names that distinguish them in the political system. Second, by nature parties are political organisations that operate within the political sphere. Third, parties are voluntary associations in which a common outlook and shared ideology define their membership. Fourth, parties have a stated commitment to transform the political system in which they operate in accordance with their ideologies through democratic means. Fifth, because parties operate in a liberal environment, they engage with other parties in a competition for the pursuit of power. This situation warrants them to aggregate, articulate, and promote public interests in the form of policy alternatives. Together, these functions are the important features that define a political party.

The nature of inter-party engagement defines the type of party system a country operates, as well as the nature of the parties that form this party system. According to Steven Wolinetz (2006, p. 51), the party system is central in understanding parties and political systems since it directly affects the “menu of choices” available to voters during elections. Maurice Duverger (1967, p. 203) notes that, “the forms and modes of their [parties] coexistence define the party system” of any given country. Giovanni Sartori (1976, p. 44) sees a party system as “the system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition”. This implies that each party, as a unit, influences and is influenced in turn by behavior of the other parties in the system. Eric Rowe (1979, p. 70) observes that, a party system constitutes the entire parties operating within a particular political system. Nevertheless, Steven Wolinetz (2006, p. 53) points out that party systems share certain features: one, the number of active parties winning elections; two, relative size and strength of the active parties; three, the number of ideological issues on which they differ; four, the gap between them on these ideological issues over which they differ; and, five, their readiness to cooperate with each other to form alliances. These features form the basis on which scholars identify and classify most modern party systems (Wolinetz, 2004). However, as Duverger (1967, p. 203) notes, “party systems are the product of many complex factors” peculiar to each country. Therefore, rigid adherence to these schema in determining party systems ill suit developing democracies such as Nigeria that still grapple with the

challenges of consolidation. Nonetheless, in their broad outline these features sufficiently capture the crux of party system debates useful for our analysis. This paper uses these features as the framework that guides its investigations of the Nigeria's different party systems.

### **The competitive party system of the First Republic, 1960-1966**

The fusion of many previously autonomous entities by the British colonial administration resulted in the emergence of the federation of Nigeria as a sovereign state on October 1, 1960 (Arnold, 1977, pp. vii-xi). The political order and system, which the country adopted at the time of independence, had its antecedents in various constitutions promulgated over a period of some forty-five years by the colonial masters. Generally, two currents led to the evolution of parties in Nigeria. One, the antagonism to colonialism, which most Nigerians shared, galvanised them into forming trade unions, socio-cultural associations, and student bodies as early as 1920 with a clear political agenda for an accelerated decolonisation of the country (Okadigbo, 1985, pp. 523-534). Two, sustained agitation for decolonisation by nationalists groups after the Second World War forced the colonial administration to cave in to pressures and set in place the necessary structures for self-rule and independence. Among these were a series of constitutional enactments that led to the introduction of the first elements of electoral politics in 1922. These developments consequently paved the way for the emergence of the first rump of parties in the country as the necessary component of competitive politics (Okadigbo, 1985, pp. 525-526). These included the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), the Peoples Union (PU), the Union of Young Nigerians (UYN), and the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM). Later, other parties emerged that started as cultural groups but transformed into political parties such as the *Egbe Omo Odu'a*, which became the Action Group (AG), and *Jam'iyyar Mutanen Arewa* that became the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) (Dudley, 1973, pp. 32-33; Paden, 1986, pp. 139-145).

By October 1960, the month of Nigeria's independence, political parties in the county numbered eighty-four. Broadly, these parties fall into any of the following three categories. The first category contained the three dominant parties that divided the country between them into three huge spheres of influence. The first was the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) based in the predominantly Muslim north under the

leadership of Ahmadu Bello who espoused as its ideology a mixture of Islamic values and Hausa/Fulani aristocratic principles. The second was the Action Group (AG) that predominated in the partly Christian and partly Muslim southwest under the leadership of Obafemi Awolowo. This party espoused a version of African socialism as its ideology. The third in this category was the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) led by Nnamdi Azikwe with its base in the mostly Christian populated Igbo southeast. This party promoted African renaissance as its ideology (Ujo, 2000, pp. 21-22). In the second category were the relatively smaller parties with sufficient electoral strength to become valuable as coalition partners to those three major parties. Among these was the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) from the Muslim dominated north under the leadership of Mallam Aminu Kano, an erudite Islamic scholar. This party had a sprinkle of Islamic revivalism and traditional African communitarianism as its ideology (Abba, 2007). Others were the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) from the largely Christian populated middle belt of Nigeria under Joseph Tarka, and the Bornu Youth Movement (BYM). In the third category were the remaining parties who until the demise of the First Republic had no proven electoral or parliamentary value (Dudley, 1968, p. 164; Kurfi, 1983, p. 8).

The character and pattern of party system formation of Nigeria did not follow the general trends that characterised party system formation in other African states. In most African states, a dominant party system was entrenched *ab-initio* (Carbone, 2007; Manning, 2005). This later turned into party-state systems such as in Ghana and Guinea. In the case of Nigeria, the process followed a unique pattern of formation that reflected the peculiar nature of the political system and the composition of its ethnic and religious groups. The Nigerian federation at the time of independence consisted of three unequal regions in terms of demography and landmass. Each of these regions besides one dominant ethnic group had a sprinkle of other minority ethnic groups. The northern region, which was the largest, had Hausa/Fulani as its major ethnic group and Islam as the major religion. The western region had the Yoruba as the dominant tribe with its population almost divided equally between Christians, Muslims, and adherents of Traditional African religions, while dominating the eastern region was the mostly Christian Igbo group. This tripartite arrangement was to become the basis on which

parliamentary seats were distributed among the regions. Naturally, the northern region emerged out of this structural arrangement with the highest number of electoral seats.

The adoption of a parliamentary democracy for the country had profound implications on the shape of the parties and the party system. Adoption of parliamentary democracy did not promote issue-based competition among parties, as was the case in most parliamentary democracies. Instead, it achieved the opposite. The three major parties turned into tribal champions each predominating in one region (Kurfi, 1983, pp. 7-8; Wilmot, 1980, pp. 5-18). This gave them sufficient political support to control their regions while being active coalition partners at the federal parliament.

In the end, two major coalitions at the federal level emerged (Paden, 1986, pp. 427-431). These were the Nigeria National Alliance (NNA) that formed the ruling coalition with NPC, NCNC, and NEPU as partners, and United Progressives Grand Alliance (UPGA) with AG and UMBC as partners that formed the opposition in the federal parliament (Abba, 2007, pp. 200-203). This exposition reveals a number of important lessons about the parties and party system in the First Republic. First, it reveals the fluid nature of the political system in Nigeria. Political considerations trumped ideological considerations (Ojo, 2010, pp. 340-349). Second, it shows how parties metamorphosed from nationalist platforms that fought colonialism to tribal vanguards. Because of this, the party system reflected a sharp division along religio-sectarian lines. It is possible based on the framework for analysis to characterise the party system as a competitive system. It is clear from the nature of the coalitions that there were at least five active parties winning elections. NPC was comparatively bigger than the members of the other two coalitions; however, the fact that it could never have mustered the required majority to head the government alone meant that the system was competitive since a coalition of the two out of the three major parties at any time could muster the needed majority to form the government.

Ideologically, the parties differed substantially. Parties like NEPU championed an ideology that favored welfare policies while parties like NPC promoted policies that favored hard work and independence. This did not mean there was a huge unbridgeable ideological divide between

most of those parties. The nature of their alliances both showed their autonomy on one hand, while on the other it revealed their readiness for co-operation on issues that promoted their political interests. For instance, the “Muslim” NPC party entered into a successful alliance with the “Christian” NCNC, which saw its leader, Nnamdi Azikwe become Nigeria’s first president and Abubakar Tafawa Balewa the prime minister. On January 15, 1966, a group of junior military officers killed the prime minister, two regional premiers, and other ranking military officers in a violent *coup d’état* that toppled the First Republic. This marked the first rupture in the evolution and development of parties and the party system in Nigeria.

### **Regulated multi-party system in the Second Republic, 1979-1983**

At least in two respects, both of which affected the development of parties and party system in Nigeria, the Second Republic was a break from the politics and constitutional order of the First Republic. First, the establishment of a Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) in 1976 by General Murtala Mohammed, which designed a new constitution that allocated greater powers to the central government under an executive president (New Nigerian, 1976). This committee also recommended a highly regulated multiparty system with stringent conditions for party registration (Ojigbo, 1979, pp. 220-223; Ujo, 2000, pp. 23-24; Williams, 1982, p. 139). After a Constituent Assembly debated these recommendations, the federal military government promulgated the report of the CDC as the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This constitution defined the nature and structure of the Second Republic, the nature of its parties, requirements for party registration, as well as the number of parties that operated in the country.

The second step was the adoption of a presidential democracy as the new constitutional order and modeled after the US political system. This also affected the trajectory of party politics in the Second Republic. In the First Republic when Nigeria practiced parliamentary model of democracy, parties had no need to develop a national outlook, as it was easy for them to form broad-based coalitions with parties from other regions. The adoption of a presidential model altered the rules of engagement for the parties. The parties now needed to develop a national character and speak in a language that resonates in other sections of the country. Since none of the ethnic groups in



the country had the necessary demography to produce a president without the support of other groups, the need for well-developed and organisationally strong national parties became crucial. Parties now took on a more national agenda (Bogaards, 2010). Specifically, the new laws required parties to have functional offices in the state headquarters of at least two-thirds of federal states. Membership must also be open to all persons irrespective of religious and tribal affiliations or social status (Kurfi, 1983, pp. 92-94). They should also ensure that the composition of their national leadership reflected the federal character principle of the country.

The process of party formation in the Second Republic started in 1977 at the Constituent Assembly, which was established by the military government to debate the CDC report (Ejiofor, 2002, p. 23; Kurfi, 1983, p. 91). This assembly provided the politicians with a forum in which they revived old political alliances and networks and forged new ones. Most of the delegates to the Constituent Assembly were seasoned politicians who participated in the First Republic. In the end, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) registered only five parties. These were the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) under the leadership of Aliyu Makaman Bida and later Adisa Akinloye; Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) under Nnamdi Azikwe, and Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) under Obafemi Awolowo. The rest were the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) under Mallam Aminu Kano and Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP) under Waziri Ibrahim (Ujo, 2000, p. 25). It was evident that the veterans of the First Republic remained at the forefront of the Second Republic's party politics. This situation led many scholars to conclude that the parties were actually old wine in new bottles. According to Richard Joseph (1991, p. 44), the "political alignments that surfaced" in the eve of the Second Republic followed the familiar patterns of the First Republic.

Ideologically, the parties espoused various forms of social ideologies. PRP espoused a radical ideology of liberation and emancipation from a bourgeois ruling class similar to the one espoused by NEPU in the First Republic (Ujo, 2000, pp. 97-98). UPN espoused a hybrid ideology between social welfarism and a free-market economy (Awolowo, 1981, pp. 32-36). NPN's ideology veered towards the direction of conservatism that promoted a free market economy within a public regulated framework (Shagari, 2001, p. 219).



The remaining two parties, NPP and GNPP, did not offer any credible ideological platform to the electorates. This should not be surprising (Sklar, 2004, p. xvii). After all, GNPP began as a splinter faction of NPP. The conflict that led to their factionalisation was not ideological. It was a personality clash between its two national leaders, Nnamdi Azikwe and Waziri Ibrahim (Amucheazi, 2008, p. 65). Results of the 1979 general elections returned NPN as the ruling party with Shehu Shagari, a northern Muslim, as the First Executive President of Nigeria. This result of the general election established NPN as the most heterogeneous party with a broad geographical spread and national outlook (Shagari, 2001, p. 209).

The number of parties in the Second Republic and the weight of the politicians behind them gave the party system an appearance of competitiveness. Nevertheless, this article applies the framework in order to arrive at a definite conclusion concerning the nature of this party system. From the performance of the parties in the general election, it was clear that all of them were electorally active. NPN controlled six states out of the nineteen in the federation. UPN had five states; NPP had four, while both PRP and GNPP had two each (Kurfi, 1983, p. 181). Size and strength wise, the parties were not significantly disproportionate to each other. NPN's majority in the country was not enough to upset the electoral balance and establish it as a dominant party. From an ideological standpoint, a wide gulf existed between PRP and UPN on one hand, and NPN and GNPP on the other. The former group represented the radical elements in Nigerian politics, while the latter represented its conservative elements. The ideological gap was very acute to discountenance the possibility of ever bridging it by the parties. Each ideological camp felt sufficiently secured on its perch. This made any thought of cooperation between the parties, at least on ideological grounds, highly unlikely. Generally, observations from the foregoing variables gave the party system the characteristics of a regulated competitive party system. It was competitive because none of the parties was sufficiently strong to exert its dominance in the country. It was regulated, however, because of the existing legal framework that sought to regulate the number of parties that operate through stringent party registration requirements. This arrangement persisted until December 31, 1983 when the military struck again and disrupted party politics and democratisation in Nigeria.

### **The two-party system of the Third Republic, 1987-1993**

The transition program designed to usher in the Third Republic was the most elaborate in the history of Nigeria's political development (Abba, 2007, pp. 55-59). Like the 1979 democratisation program, this too provided Nigeria with a new constitution, a political order and above all, a new party system (Amucheazi, 2008, pp. 58-59). From the steps taken by the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida in shaping the activities of parties, it would be correct to point out that at no time in Nigeria's history did party politics witness greater transformation than in this period (Akinola, 1990). Indications for the commitment of the military leaders to a new form of party politics first manifested when the government refused registration to over thirteen political associations that applied for registration as parties to the National Electoral Commission (NEC). The military denied them registration because they lacked national outlook and broad geographical spread. The military also accused them of representing the politics of the past that fostered parochialism by the "old breed" politicians (Abba and Mohammed, 2007, pp. 142-143). Instead, the government announced two state-formed and funded parties on the recommendations of its political bureau: the National Republican Convention (NRC) and Social Democratic Party (SDP). This was the first ever attempt to operate state formed and managed parties in Nigeria. It was also the first time the country adopted a new party system, two-partyism (Ujo, 2000, pp. 38-39).

There were several rationalisations for this unusual step. Omo Omoruyi (2001) notes that the two parties rid the country of four dangerous tendencies that constrained previous attempts at democratisation and party politics. First, it rid the country of the dichotomy between the so-called "founders" and "joiners" of the parties that crippled internal democracy in the parties. Second, it rid the country of the pre-eminence of ethnicity in the parties that created sectarian division. Third, it rid the country of the absence of a truly competitive party system. Fourth, it solved the problem of national parties with coherent social ideologies. Similarly, Elo Amucheazi (2008, p. 63) notes that NRC and SDP "were conceived and made to function as democratic institutions so as to nurture democracy in Nigeria". In the words of President Babangida (1989), this two-party structure was meant to offer:

[a] grassroot basis for the emergence of political parties; give equal rights and opportunities to all Nigerians to participate in the political process irrespective of their wealth, religion, geopolitical backgrounds and professional endeavors; and preclude the emergence of political alliances along the same lines as in the First and Second Republic and, therefore, give Nigerians a new political structure within which to operate.

According to Elo Amucheazi (2008, p. 58), “with the benefit of the knowledge of the political crisis which the country had experienced in the past as a result of the activities of political parties, the challenge to IBB was to put in place a truly functional party system for transition to democracy”. Ideologically, NRC and SDP copied the two major parties of the US: the Republican and the Democrats. According to Babangida (1989), manifestoes of these parties “shall reflect an ideological spectrum, one little to the left and the other little to the right, of the center”. Stripped of all political semantics, the assumption was that the Nigerian political class fall into one of the two ideological blocs: progressive or conservative. This assumption merely reflected the global ideological divide at the time between capitalism and socialism. Hence, NRC’s ideology tilted to the right, while that of SDP tilted to the left.

There were two other remarkable things about the nature of these parties and the ensuing structure of the party system. Not only were these parties formed and named by the military government, their constitutions and manifestoes were written by it, their offices constructed by it, and their operations financed by it as well (Amucheazi, 2008, pp. 66-67). In other words, the government appointed their staff, supervised their activities, and signed their chequebooks. As a result, they lacked the necessary institutional autonomy to compete effectively against each other and engage the military for successful democratisation. Evidence of their lack of independence was in the arbitrary way the military regime disbanded their leaderships and suspended their operations several times in the course of the transition program. This greatly hampered the way the party system worked at that period. Since the viability and ability of the parties to compete actively against each other depended solely on the goodwill of the military government, one could assume that in the event one of the parties did not enjoy favor with the government, it would lose its patronage.

Nevertheless, the two-party system recorded some laudable achievements especially in its early period. The existence of only two equal parties successfully checkmated the tendency of the emergence of a dominant party in the system. States and national assemblies as well as gubernatorial polls showed a tight race in which neither of the parties showed any remarkable strength to dominate the other. Even the states controlled by either of the parties were divided nearly into equal parts.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, for a heterogeneous country like Nigeria that has been grappling with serious challenges of integration and sectarian cohesion, these parties succeeded in checking sectarian, ethnic, and religious sympathies. It was true that at a later period NRC was associated with the conservative North and SDP with the progressive South. Nevertheless, even this categorisation was very fluid and was largely due to the fact that the political elites in those two regions were presumably associated with these ideological currents. After the annulment of the presidential election of June 12, 1993, Babangida stepped aside as the military president and established an Interim National Government (ING) to conduct new presidential election. The two-party structure and all the other structures of the transition program were substantially unaffected by the annulment.

### **The Abacha military interregnum, 1993-1998**

Before the ING could achieve its goal, General Sani Abacha sacked it on November 17, 1993. The entire transition program was terminated (Osumah and Ikelegbe, 2009). This meant that all the progress recorded in the development of party politics and the democratisation process during the Third Republic suffered a setback. Abacha scrapped the two parties, closed their offices, folded up their activities, and disbanded NEC, the electoral body. In their place, a Constituent Assembly was convened in 1994, a new transition timetable with 1998 as the new handover of power date was announced, and a new electoral body, the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON), was established to supervise the new transition (Useni, 1996).

NECON received 13 applications from various associations for registration as parties. Five among these had their applications approved eventually. These were the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), the Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM), the Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN), the National Center Party of Nigeria (NCPN), and

the Congress for National Consensus (CNC) (Akingbade, 2011). The stringent conditions imposed by NECON were designed deliberately to limit the number of parties in the country (Agbese, 1999). Strangely, one of those conditions prohibited ideological associations from registering as parties. In other words, the government was not interested in seeing parties with coherent ideologies competing for power. Rather, the emphasis was on associations with pragmatic solutions and programs against Nigeria's many socio-economic and political ills (Ujo, 2000, pp. 53-55).

The parties' organisational disarray, lack of internal democracy, high level of indiscipline, big man syndrome, and defections, complimented their complete absence of ideological currents. Many students of Nigerian politics see these parties merely as the vehicle in the hands of the military, specifically General Abacha, to actualise his political ambitions. Two events that preceded the death of Abacha in 1998 made this argument hard to dismiss. The first was the parties' primaries for local councils, states, and national assemblies and the subsequent general elections that returned the winners into various offices. The primaries were in a simple language, a sham, and a fraud. The party leaders without pretense of holding free and fair elections anointed their preferred candidates. The conduct of the general elections was not different. Areas of influence were carved and allocated to friends and stooges of the government. This arrangement saw the division of the entire country into spheres of influence.

The second event was the "adoption" of Abacha by the five parties as their joint presidential candidate. Two interesting dimensions to this drama betrayed the hollow nature of these parties. One, this was the first time a sitting military president was adopted by a political party as its presidential candidate (Odoemenam, 1998). Two, it was alarming when all the parties competed vigorously against each other to adopt Abacha as their presidential candidate. The danger of this action to the principles of internal party democracy, party loyalty, and discipline would have been enormous. These quite naturally affected the party system formation and the ensuing interaction between the parties. Because ideology was never in the mix, the only thing left for the parties and based on which any attempt at system identification can be made was the relative size and strength of these parties. Yet, even this could not be a reliable variable, since size was not determined by the strength

of their ideologies, membership base, or electoral victories, but by their access to the government and the size of its patronage. Therefore, while on the surface there were multiple parties with varying size and strength, in reality there was no competition or interaction between them since almost all of them were more or less departments of the government.

### **The weak-dominant party system of the Fourth Republic, 1999-2011**

The emergence of General Abdussalam Abubakar, following Abacha's death in 1998, altered the nature of the parties and the party system once again in the country. With the benefit of hindsight, this party system proved to be the most enduring, even if most tumultuous in terms of stability and institutionalisation. Among the many steps taken by Abdussalam to fast track Nigeria's transition to democracy, three had direct impact on the type of party system in operation in the Fourth Republic and the nature of its party politics. The first was the cancellation of the Abacha transition program as being grossly flawed and fundamentally designed to help Abacha actualise his political ambition. In its place, a new transition program with May 29, 1999 as the date of military disengagement from power was announced (Muhammad, 2007). Practical steps taken to realise this objective included the scrapping of NECON and the establishment of a new electoral body, namely the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), and promulgation of a new constitution. In addition, the five parties under Abacha were disbanded and INEC was given the mandate to register new parties.

Out of the twenty-six associations that applied for registration, nine secured conditional approval (Obiyan, 1999). Performance of the nine parties in local council polls was a pre-condition for final approval of their registration status. At the end, only three parties were registered. These were the Alliance for Democracy (AD), the All Peoples Party (APP), and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) (Obiyan, 1999). Finally, political exiles were asked to return home and political prisoners were pardoned and released. One of the released prisoners was General Olusegun Obasanjo convicted with General Shehu Yar'adua of plotting to overthrow the Abacha regime. Olusegun Obasanjo was elected in 1999 as the president of Nigeria on the platform of PDP.

In the 1999 general election, PDP controlled 21 out of the 36 states in the federation, with 9 under the control of APP and 6 under AD. The 2003 general election saw PDP increasing its control margin to 28, with

APP decreasing its control to 7, and AD to only 1 state. By 2011 when the fourth general elections were held, this three parties' structure had collapsed and new parties that proved formidable in challenging the dominance of the ruling party emerged. Parties, especially the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), and the Labour Party (LP) became effective both as electoral and parliamentary parties. Although their relative size and strength were constrained by their geographical spread and resources, yet their emergence substantially affected the party system in the Fourth Republic. It would be stretching the fact to say that the system as it stands today is pluralistic and competitive. Yet, it is inaccurate to say that the system manifests all the traits of a dominant party system. In order, therefore, to be able to determine the party system in the Fourth Republic, it is first important to explain the unique traits, which this system exhibits.

The 1999 general elections that ushered in the Fourth Republic and returned PDP as the ruling party were relatively fairer than all the subsequent general elections in the Fourth Republic. In spite of its competitive nature, the unequal size and strength of the parties even at that stage manifested very clearly with the results of the elections. This unequal strength became confounded with the PDP's control of the federal government and the majority of federal states. This affected the shape the party system assumed since then in two ways. First, it ensured that PDP consolidated its control and established its dominance in the country, while other parties suffer from dearth of resources. In developing democracies, it is common for rulers to use state resources in conferring patronage to supporters and blackmailing opponents (Manning, 2005). The case in Nigeria is no different. Access to state resources meant that PDP could secure its dominance while destroying any form of opposition against it. The opposition parties could not compete effectively against the ruling party since they do not have access to the type of resources, which the ruling party controls. As a result, the first elements of systemic inequality within the system were entrenched. Second, because PDP controls the federal legislature and majority of the states of the federation, it can ensure the passage of legislations that further guard its dominance. It can also make appointments into strategic positions that enhance its dominance such as in the electoral body, judiciary, and in security agencies.



These conditions ensure that no serious inter-party competition could occur that is capable of substantially affecting the dominance of the ruling party in the Fourth Republic. As at present, the combined electoral and parliamentary strength of these parties does not match that of the ruling party. Additionally, the ruling party is the only party with genuine national presence. The inter-party engagement is not predicated on any form of strong ideological foundation. Consequently, it is not entirely useful to apply the ideological indicator in determining the gap between the parties in the Fourth Republic. Based on these points, this article accepts the party system in the Fourth Republic as a dominant type. Yet, the fact that the opposition parties enjoy substantial freedom, institutional autonomy, and are relatively free from intrusive legislations meant that the system could not have been truly dominant in the classical sense. In other societies with a dominant system, the government seldom allows opposition parties to register not to mention participate in the electoral processes (Carbone, 2007). Opposition parties in Nigeria do not face these types of problems. For these reasons, it is better to describe the party system as a weak-dominant one. It is dominant because one party controls more than two-thirds of all parliamentary seats, but weak because opposition parties are free from intrusive legislations that curtail their freedoms and prevent them from participating actively in the political processes.

## **Conclusion**

Nigeria's political system witnessed four types of party systems since independence in 1960. The first was the competitive multi-party system of the First Republic. During this time, there were eighty-four parties. Their strengths differed. Some were local pressure groups with little or no electoral success. Others were fairly strong and influential in specific parts of the country. Yet, there were three major parties with regional dominance. These parties succeeded in dividing the country into three vast political blocs. They also managed to maintain between them a fiercely competitive streak that gave the party system the characteristic of a competitive multi-party system. The second type of party system was the regulated multi-partyism of the Second Republic. Three major parties and two relatively smaller parties engaged themselves in a lively political competition in which the ruling party had no substantial majority. It was a regulated system in the view of this article because

the party laws made strenuous efforts to limit the number of parties that register and participate in the politics of the Second Republic. There is an element of similarity here with the five parties that operated under Abacha. The Abacha period also witnessed attempts by the electoral body to limit the number of parties that registered. However, whereas parties of the Second Republic had coherent social ideologies, the parties under Abacha had none. Again, parties of the Second Republic enjoyed substantial institutional autonomy, whereas the parties under Abacha did not. In fact, it is of no use analytically to talk of a party system under Abacha since the parties were practically administered as departments of government. They lacked the necessary institutional and organisational autonomy.

The two-party system of the Third Republic was the third type of party system, which the country adopted. Adoption of this system followed a careful analysis of the historical and political factors that shaped politics in Nigeria up to that period. It addressed specific problems associated with unequal size of parties and their regionalisation by the political elites. The fourth system is the current party system in the Fourth Republic. This system is a weak-dominant one. As pointed out, this system manifests the existence of a major party but not sufficiently dominant to transform the party system into a dominant one (Bogaards, 2004). In the final analysis, the combined influence of historical experience and attempts by various governments helped shape the various party systems witnessed by Nigeria since independence in 1960 to the present Republic.

## Endnotes

1. During the gubernatorial elections, each of the two parties won exactly fifteen states. However, in the councils and assembly polls, SDP had a slight margin over NRC. The SDP won 3,765 councilors and 315 local government council chairpersons, while it won 626 members of the states' houses of assembly giving it a majority in 18 states of the federation. NRC, on the other hand, won 3,360 councilors, 274 local council chairpersons, and 541 assembly members with majority control in 11 states' houses of assembly (See Abba and Mohammed, 2007, pp. 145-146).

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